

Mr. Tevlín's thievish adventure

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE WHO TAKE AN INTEREST IN EVERY SINGLE object, every single thing, every single happening which they notice in the street. One of these good people was Mr. Tevlín. For instance, if Mr. Tevlín saw a barrel of pickled herrings in front of a shop in the street he would stop, look, and wait until the servant rolled it away into the shop. Then he would nod his head in agreement and walk on.

If round the corner he saw a handcart standing in the street, he would look at it and again wait to see who would come and fetch it. It gave him pleasure that people were working. He liked to watch how they unloaded bricks and stones. He was interested in the work of paving and indeed in any work activity whatsoever.

He took an interest in anything which was part of life's daily round — horses which could not pull a load, and switchmen on the tram lines — and he was always agreeably excited when he saw someone doing a job. He also liked to speculate on what a passerby might be doing, and his eye would brighten if he succeeded in guessing that person's profession.

It was one of his pleasures to stroll along the streets — at least it was until this happened to him. He went out as usual into the street, and in a busy frequented thoroughfare noticed a bicycle standing by the pavement — an abandoned bicycle. He looked

around, because he was interested to know who would be so careless as to leave a bicycle standing in the street like that. He did not see any shop. And so he thought that it could not belong to a delivery boy on a tradesman's bicycle, but that obviously something was being delivered here to a private individual at his home. He also noticed that there was no bar nearby. The bicycle stood by the pavement right in front of the entrance to an apartment block.

On the opposite pavement a policeman was standing, watching Mr. Tevlín with interest as he continued to stare about him and stand near the bicycle.

Mr. Tevlín considered that it was a great act of carelessness to leave a bicycle standing like that by the pavement, and he thought he would wait near it until its owner turned up. But then he wondered whether perhaps the bicycle might not have a padlock to prevent anyone riding off on it, and so he walked round the bicycle and inspected it on the other side.

Meanwhile the policeman was looking at Mr. Tevlín with ever increasing interest too, and even walked nearer towards him.

Mr. Tevlín ascertained that the bicycle had no padlock. "That really is careless," he sighed. "Anyone could jump on it and ride away."

He went on examining the bicycle. It was very well made. And what make was it? He took hold of the handlebars and leaned over it. The bicycle slipped out from under him, and as he got up he saw a face looking down on him. It was a severe, angry, and menacing face — the face of the policeman.

"What are you doing, messing about with someone else's bicycle?" the policeman asked sternly.

"I was looking to see what the make was."

"And why did you take it by the handlebars?"

Already a crowd of people had gathered around, the sort of people, like Mr. Tevlín, who take an interest in everything, just as Mr. Tevlín took an interest in that unfortunate bicycle.

"By the handlebars. . ." Mr. Tevlín stammered pitifully. "I'm waiting here for the owner."

"And what is the owner's name?"

"I have no idea."

"Then why are you waiting for him?"

"So that nobody steals it from him."

There was laughter among the crowd. "Perhaps so that no one *else* should steal it from him" said the policeman ironically. "Put it back where you took it from, and I arrest you in the name of the law."

That policeman was also just like Mr. Tevlín. He was interested in everything, every object, every little happening, and most of all in Mr. Tevlín.

Today one need no longer say, "He trembled like aspen leaf." One might just as well say, "He trembled like Mr. Tevlín." Indeed Mr. Tevlín trembled so much that the policeman had sometimes to drag him along after him, like a puppy, from the place where the abandoned bicycle was still standing by the pavement in front of the apartment block, number 1912a.

He had still not stopped trembling when he was brought into the premises of police headquarters and heard the report: "Humbly report that this man was trying to steal a bicycle in front of apartment block number 1912a." And the policeman described how Mr. Tevlín had not succeeded, while Mr. Tevlín continually interrupted him, saying, "Me, why I'm not a thief. I can't even ride a bicycle."

He could not manage to find a better excuse. He went on repeating that he did not know how to ride a bicycle, that it would be pointless for him to steal one, and that, if he had wanted to have one, he could buy them by the dozen. Looking utterly miserable, he stood there repeating, "Honestly, believe me, I don't know how to ride a bicycle."

"And he immediately fell down with it when he was trying to jump on to it."

"How could I be jumping on to it," Mr. Tevlín moaned, "when I don't know how to ride anyhow." Then he added that he was just a well-intentioned idiot who wanted to help everybody.

At that moment the door opened and a young man rushed into the police station in a state of panic.

"My bicycle's gone," he cried. "It was standing in front of apartment block number 1912a and I've just heard that somebody has been trying to steal it!"

The policeman pointed his finger at Mr. Tevlín.

"Now, don't deny it," said the Police Commissioner to Mr. Tevlín, "and tell us the name of your accomplice."

"I can't," Mr. Tevlín said with a sigh.

"Then put him behind bars for the time being," said the Commissioner. Mr. Tevlín went down on his knees and shouted out, "In God's name, please don't do this, gentlemen."

The next day they took him off to the criminal court.

The examining magistrate, Counsellor Vincek, was a very nice man. He did not want to make things worse for any accused person and used all possible means to investigate most carefully the statements of the criminals who were under examination.

"Very well," he said to Mr. Tevlín. "You persist in maintaining that you cannot ride a bicycle. Tomorrow, then, a commission of this court will investigate the matter. We'll take you outside the gate and put you on a bicycle. Then we'll see whether you can ride or not."

The important day arrived and, in the presence of the Commission, the warder seated Mr. Tevlín on a bicycle on the main road near the Olšany Cemetery.

"I'll fall off!" Mr. Tevlín cried out in horror, never having sat on a bicycle before.

At a sign from the examining magistrate the warder gave the bicycle a shove, and Mr. Tevlín rode forward on the gentle incline of the road, calling out all the time, "I'm going to fall."

In a panic he stepped on the pedals for fear he would be killed. He stepped on them even harder, grasped the handlebars in a convulsive grip, and instinctively hurtled down the road to Strašnice like the most expert cyclist. He had done it. He called out, "I'm going to fall!" and rode off with great speed until he disappeared out of sight of the Commission.

Down at Strašnice he finally succeeded in falling into a ditch, after having run over a Jewess.

He got three months for having lied in saying that he could not ride a bicycle, when in fact he even tried to escape on it. And for that he had to suffer disciplinary punishment.